CHAPTER ELEVEN

What Happened to Evil?

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In *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (2002) I argued that the problem of evil was the most important question driving modern philosophy. This claim is surprising in view of the historical narrative that came to seem standard for twentieth-century philosophers, particularly in Anglo-American circles. In that narrative, modern philosophy is driven by epistemology, the study of the nature of knowledge, after Kant taught us that metaphysical speculation about the nature of reality transcends the limits that reason can know. It's a narrative that should have raised a host of questions, foremost among them the question of motive, for it neither explains why centuries of philosophy should concern itself with metaphysics nor why epistemology would be a worthwhile successor. Anyone who takes Kant seriously must be struck by his repeated insistence that metaphysical questions are prescribed by the very nature of reason itself;

what drove major thinkers to wrestle with them cannot have been mere puzzles. But his conclusion that speculative questions are motivated by practical ones should not be read narrowly. To be sure, whether our wills are free may have implications for ethics, but it also has roots in questions that today seem to belong to theology and cosmology. The fragmentation of philosophy into neat subdivisions like metaphysics and ethics is a practice that would have baffled philosophers before the twentieth century. This fragmentation, as foreign to Plato as to Nietzsche, is part of what has prevented us from understanding the problem of evil itself.

When twentieth-century philosophers discussed the problem at all, they discussed it as a problem for philosophy of religion—itself a marginalized branch of philosophy—and hence of interest only to traditional theists.[1] This made some sense as long as focus was confined to two historical texts, Leibniz's *Theodicy* and Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, each of which set out the problem of evil in clearly theist terms: a God who permits evil cannot both be omnipotent and benevolent. If He wanted nothing but good, then He's clearly not able to enforce His will; if He can truly do whatever He wants to, then given what we know of the outcome, He cannot possibly be benevolent. Reason is thus forced to choose between denying the (ultimate) reality of evil and denying one of the two attributes central to every monotheist conception of divinity. Leibniz tried to straddle both horns of this dilemma in turns, now arguing that evils would come to seem acceptable could we only know as much as God does, now restricting God's power with certain requirements of necessity. Amusing himself with these and other arguments, Hume took the problem of evil to undermine monotheism. Both texts are brilliant and deserve far more attention than they can be given here, but confining attention to them unduly restricted the framing of the

1 Hannah Arendt is the great exception. See Susan Neiman, "Theodicy in Jerusalem," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Aschheim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 65–90.

problem. Had twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy cast a wider net, it would have seen the problem of evil to drive philosophy in far deeper ways.

"Philosophy, like the overture to *Don Giovanni,* starts with a minor chord."[2] Schopenhauer was no theist, and yet he was certain: if everything were as it should be, it would never have occurred to us to ask why. (We'd have no reason to imagine another state, so we couldn't even be grateful for that one.) It's an idea that might occur to any thoughtful reader of Kant, whose work Schopenhauer cherished, though the conclusions he drew from it are not ones Kant would have drawn. Schopenhauer's claim that "the astonishment that urges us to philosophize *obviously* springs from the sight of the evil and wickedness in the world" can be understood as follows.[3] The difference between nature and reason, between the way things are and the way things ought to be, creates the first impulse to metaphysics, for it presents real problems. Of course the fact that things are not as they should be is also a source of moral and political problems that demand more practical than conceptual solutions. But conceptual solutions matter, and philosophers have sought them in distinctions between appearance and reality, phenomena and noumena, the real and the rational. For the gap between *is* and *ought* creates the need to ask *why*. This is because the principle of sufficient reason—the idea that there is a reason why things happen one way rather than another—which is presupposed in the first stumblings of children as in the last strivings of metaphysicians, itself presupposes that only a world which is the best of all possible ones is a world that makes sense. Just imagine the world as a garden where everything is good. Hunger is stilled without effort; children are born without pain. Neither death nor shame clouds any horizon. It's a state in which it's hard to imagine what questions could

2 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), 2:171.

3 Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 2:171; emphasis added.

arise—which is why the Bible posits a taste of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in order to get history going. Kant said reason was born when we left the Garden of Eden.[4]

In a world that isn't the best one, you needn't be a theist to ask, "Why not?" In the best case, that question expresses the indignation that will lead to social action, in the worst case it is merely a metaphysical whine. But if you do not ask it at all you have abandoned the idea that reason can make sense of the world as a whole. That's certainly an idea that can be abandoned. Long before the twentieth century saw a literature of the absurd, the view that reason is impotent in the face of devastation and cruelty was championed by Bayle, Hume, and Schopenhauer himself. But this view is as much a response to the problem of evil as it is a rejection of it. For the problem of evil, whether stated in cosmic terms or confined to Socrates's question about whether we can willingly choose anything but the good, is a question about intelligibility. Must we choose between acknowledging the reality of evil and maintaining some allegiance to reason?

On this reading the problem of evil is clearly not a religious problem. On the contrary, religion is the most common means humankind developed to cope with the problem of evil. The means are as varied as religious texts themselves. Some developed doctrines of the afterlife in which innocent suffering is rewarded and the obstinately wicked are punished.[5] Whether punishment involves eternal simmering in a fiery lake or rebirth as a worm matters less than the form of explanation: there is no perfect justice in *this* world, but the universe as a whole is intelligible because there is another one. In that world all wrongs will be righted, all suffering redeemed. It's a simple solution, but the number of believers who continue to maintain it

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4 Immanuel Kant, "Conjectural Beginnings of Human History," trans. Allen W. Wood, in Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöller and Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 168.

5 See the formulation in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1928), A 73/B 98.

testifies to its power. Alternatively, others have developed doctrines that focus less on righting wrongs than on making them comprehensible. The gap between the way the world is and the way that it should be was not original to the universe; it arose as a form of punishment: had Adam only refused the apple, we'd all be innocent and immortal today. Other explanations are available to religions that reject monotheism and thus can blame the presence of evil on powerful primeval forces. Shades of this view may be present in some of the deepest Christian accounts of evil, which work by deflecting the question: the sin may be original, but innocent suffering is so thoroughly a part of the world that even God chooses to partake in it. Unjust suffering reflects something essential about life on earth. And this line in turn is echoed in Buddhism, through the figure of the prince who spurns a life protected from suffering to take it on himself. My interest here is not to explore the variety and richness of religious response to the problem of evil. Rather, the reminder of how much religion is a response to it should serve as a reminder that evil is a problem before we ever encounter religion at all. Contemporary thinkers who view religion as the source of the problem of evil have the matter backward. The problem of evil is the central worry that gets religion going and much of philosophy as well.

Evil in Modern Thought offered a narrative of the history of modern philosophy that is more inclusive than the one currently taught, accounting for a greater number of texts that were ignored on an over-indulgent application of the principle of charity, which disregarded anything that might be viewed as a religious question. It is also more responsive to the concerns with which most people turn to philosophy. When not psychotic, under the influence of mind-expanding substances, or having unusually vivid dreams, why do people worry about the distinction between appearance and reality? Don't we learn very early that we're blessed with enough senses to provide checks and balances if we're uncertain about the data provided by one of them? (If we really need to know whether the stick in the water is as bent

as it looks from a distance we can walk to the pond and pull it out.) Didn't Descartes tell us that only madmen really wonder if all their perceptions might be dreams? Don't we find these sorts of philosophical concerns dissipating like Hume's, with or without a glass of sherry and a conversation about *anything,* be it backgammon or tenure or mortgages—not to mention love and death—that reminds us that the external world presents other challenges than that of proving its existence? I believe that the metaphysical worries about the difference between appearance and reality have, since Plato, been less often driven by the worry that appearances will not turn out what they seem to be, but rather the fear that they will.

Thus philosophers can be divided according to the ways they respond to the fact that the world is so often so far from the way it ought to be. On one side are those who insist on the existence of some truer, deeper reality behind the appearances in which—contrary to the superficial chaos and misery we experience—everything is as it should be. Plato, Leibniz, and Hegel offer the clearest examples of such a view, but it can also include those like Rousseau and Marx who believed that structures behind appearances allow for change through the course of history. Now all their proposals for understanding creation as something other than what it appears to be (or changing it, which means that its appearance was not essential) could be condemned as taking over prerogatives best left to its Author. But even more troubling is the worry that the search for a better order behind appearances was an attempt to flee the relentlessness of the appearances, and thereby deny the reality of evil and misery. So an opposing line of thought includes philosophers as different as Voltaire, Hume, and Schopenhauer, who insist that moral and intellectual honesty requires us to acknowledge that reality is just as bad as it seems. Note that while both sides are driven by moral considerations, the moral matters quickly issue in metaphysical ones. The division I've drawn is rough around the edges, and joins together philosophers who would be surprised to learn they had much in common. Considerations of space prevent me from

arguing for those divisions here.[6] I want to use this opportunity to approach another question. Why, if my narrative has some merit, was the problem of evil written out of standard narratives of the history of philosophy?

A COMBINATION of politeness and embarrassment led most twentieth-century readers confronted with a historical text to scurry behind its manifest content to find something they found more intellectually respectable than what the text actually said. So Bertrand Russell—whose history of philosophy devotes more entries to "Egypt" than to "evil"—could devote a book to Leibniz that dismissed the *Theodicy* as a piece of court propaganda, presuming he was doing his subject a favor by ignoring his embarrassing preoccupation with the divine in favor of more serious matters like mathematical logic. So contemporary philosophers rush over the obvious fact that even Descartes's *Meditations*—not my choice for the place to begin the study of modern philosophy, but it is the standard one—is in the first instance a complex proof that God is not a deceiver. In contrast to the brain-in-vat stories sometimes told in an attempt to make Descartes compelling to contemporary students, the idea that the world might be controlled by a force that does not want our good was not a sci-fi fantasy but an ever-present nightmare. Descartes lived in a world of people who regularly tortured each other to death over differing opinions on the matter. The attempt to sanitize his work by reading out the theology and arguing that the *Meditations* is really about general skepticism or the foundations of modern science are in danger of ignoring the obvious: that for Descartes, it really was about God and devils, with Gnosticism looming temptingly in the background. Descartes's reflections on God's power led to extremes: he held God's omnipotence to be so absolute that it included the ability

6 Interested readers will find arguments for this, and other questions discussed too briefly in this paper, in my *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

to do what is logically impossible. But a God whose omnipotence is not subject to any law of reason whatsoever comes perilously close to an evil demon himself.

Along with misplaced charity and embarrassment there is another important reason that enabled twentieth-century philosophy to overlook the centrality of the problem of evil: earlier philosophers writing about evil strike contemporary readers as hopelessly confused. Leibniz's defense of God's justice, for example, depends on his division of all our misery into metaphysical, natural, and moral evils. It's this division, together with his assumption of a causal link between them, which will strike us as sorely in need of defense. For Leibniz, metaphysical evil is the degeneration inherent in the limits of the substance(s) of which the world is made. Natural evil is the pain and suffering we experience in it. Moral evil is the crime for which natural evil is the certain and inevitable punishment. The assumption that moral and natural evils are causally linked is an assumption Leibniz never subjected to scrutiny, for he held the connection between moral and natural evils to be too self-evident to question seriously. The complexity of his accounts of freedom do not make up for the simplicity of his account of the relations between sin and suffering. This assumption was first challenged seriously in the eighteenth century. Despite the fact that no book of the Bible inspired more commentary than the Book of Job, Kant was the first philosopher who openly sympathized with him. Earlier thinkers took the part of his friends: the natural evils besetting Job must have their cause in some moral evil that Job's apparent righteousness concealed. And the Lisbon earthquake raised philosophical problems because it wiped out a large number of citizens in what was then a major European capital no more prone to moral evil than Paris or London; there, it seemed to Voltaire and others, was suffering without sin or meaning at all.

But nothing seems more different to us than the devastation of the Lisbon earthquake and the brutality of Auschwitz. Treating natural disasters and human villainy as part of the same problem

will seem to be what philosophers not only call a category mistake but what ordinary people also call a moral one. Alternatively, if the pre-twentieth-century grab bag of metaphysical, natural, and moral evils isn't merely an expression of confusion, it must be the expression of a theistic worldview so complete that it leaves God responsible for everything. Thus if sense can be made of earlier discussions of evil, it is only within a framework that places it squarely within theology, reason enough for most contemporary philosophers to avoid it.

Initially this objection makes sense. Why should texts that make no fundamental distinctions between earthquakes and massacres have anything to say to us? We may disagree about where to apply it, but we (think we) know what we mean when we use the word "evil," denoting acts of cruelty undertaken by humans, preferably with malice and forethought. Why pay attention to philosophers whose very conception of evil is so foreign to make us doubt we are discussing the same subject? But the objection fails to see that our own conception of evil is historical. Even the ancients were aware that there are differences between illness and earthquakes, on the one hand, and torture and slaughter, on the other. Our conviction that this difference is fundamental is a modern one, and it was born not in ignorance of the traditional problem of evil but in the attempt to solve it. The sharp distinction between natural and moral evils that now seems so self-evident they're no longer denoted by a single word was nourished by the Lisbon earthquake and worked out by Rousseau.

Kant's essay "On the Impossibility of All Philosophical Attempts at Theodicy" argued that every attempt at traditional theodicy is as vain and dishonest as the attempts of Job's friends to comfort him. Nonetheless, he viewed Rousseau's work as a substitute for theodicy, an achievement so great to merit the designation "Newton of the mind," an epithet Hume openly coveted but never received. Kant's explanation can be found in an extraordinary note that has been generally overlooked.

> Newton was the first to see order and regularity combined with great simplicity, where disorder and ill-matched variety had reigned before. Since then comets have been moving in geometric orbits. Rousseau was the first to discover the deeply concealed nature of man and to observe the hidden law that justifies Providence. Before them, the objections of Alfonso and the Manicheans were valid. After Newton and Rousseau, God is justified, and Pope's thesis is henceforth true.[7]

Kant often quoted Alexander Pope, his favorite poet, during his lectures. The thesis to which he here refers is presumably Pope's claim, well-known at the time from the *Essay on Man:* "Whatever is, is right!" But who was Alfonso? The thirteenth-century Castilian monarch cast a shadow for centuries, less for his enlightened policies than for a statement that was considered the epitome of blasphemy. After several years spent studying Ptolemaic astronomy—the most advanced of his day—King Alfonso declared, "If I had been of God's counsel at Creation, many things would have been ordered better."

For nearly half a millennium, this presumption was viewed as rebellion against God's order; Alfonso's own son's rebellion against the crown and the ensuing civil war that ended the king's life seemed but providential justice. Pierre Bayle wrote that no one was ignorant of Alfonso's historical studies and their consequences, and his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* detailed numerous variants of the story.[8] The skeptical Bayle took Alfonso's side. Not only was the natural world unduly chaotic and fundamentally incomprehensible; human history, for Bayle, was "the history of crimes and misfortunes" and therefore even

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7 Immanuel Kant, *Bemerkungen zu den Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und des Erhabenen* [*Remarks on Observations of the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*] (1764–1765), in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaft (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–), 20:58–59.

8 Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, trans. J. J. and P. Knapton (1738; reprint, New York: Garland Press, 1984), 380 ff.

worse. Bayle's *Dictionary* was the target of Leibniz's *Theodicy*, which used Alfonso for a very different purpose. Ptolemaic astronomy may have looked chaotic, but Newton's achievement revealed a universe of perfect order. So, argued Leibniz, would the progress of science reveal the wisdom in all of creation. Those who objected to Leibniz's *Theodicy* would one day seem as foolish as the Spanish king who concluded that the world makes no sense from outdated astronomy.

> If we hold the same opinion as King Alfonso, we shall, I say, receive this answer: You have known the world only since the day before yesterday, you see scarce farther than your nose, and you carp at the world. Wait until you know more of the world . . . and you will find there a contrivance and a beauty transcending all imagination. Let us thence draw conclusions as to the wisdom and goodness of the author of things, even in the things that we know not.[9]

Kant thought Rousseau had answered Alfonso's objections by showing the human world to be comprehensible. Kant's note was written in 1765, at the time when, he tells us elsewhere, reading Rousseau was changing his life. Rousseau provided an explanation of evil's entrance into the world without appealing to original sin. His second *Discourse* (1754) is a naturalistic version of the Fall that shows how we went from a state of innocence to the state we're in through a series of unfortunate but understandable errors. Rousseau's account was revolutionary because it introduced history into the discussion of evil. By arguing that human nature has a history, Rousseau makes evil both comprehensible and—at least in principle—avoidable. It's important to understand that his goal was not simply to explain what we call evil, human cruelty, and corruption but to show that creation with all its imperfections, prominently including ourselves, makes sense. History is the right kind

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9 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E. M. Huggard (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 248.

of category to introduce into explanation because it makes actions intelligible without being determined. And if it were not a fatal, essential flaw but historical circumstances that led to the introduction of evil, historical circumstances might allow us to overcome it.

The second *Discourse* was a diagnosis of our collective illness—a very different prism through which to view the human condition than the prism of sin. Rousseau's subsequent works provided different prescriptions for cure. In the *Social Contract* (1762), he began with "men as they are and laws as they should be" on the hypothesis that the right sort of state could sufficiently shape its citizens to prevent the development of inclinations that lead to evil. In *Emile* (1762), he began from the opposite direction, considering how, within social structures as they are, an individual man who would become a cornerstone of a healthy society might be shaped. Neither prescription has (yet) been successful, and each has been subject to scorn that overlooks how very hard it would be for human beings with our present flaws to create ideal social structures or for flawed social structures to welcome genuinely free and equal human beings. Kant would eventually recommend bootstrapping as the not entirely satisfactory but only possible way out of the dilemma.[10] Nonetheless he esteemed Rousseau for answering Alfonso's objections: if humankind has a history through which evil developed naturally, and the potential to overcome evil without resorting to the miracle of divine intervention, then the world as it was created is intelligible. As history replaces theology, education replaces grace.

Paradoxically, the preoccupation with the problem of evil that had engaged earlier thinkers like Bayle and Leibniz led Rousseau to a solution that so thoroughly frames modern consciousness we have trouble recognizing it. Rousseau's work transformed the problem of evil so that natural evils drop out of the picture, becoming—like the

10 See Immanuel Kant, "Lectures on Pedagogy," in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, trans. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 445.

indigestion that follows the Parisian banquets he abhorred—just the result of vain, foolish, and unhealthy behavior. His focus, like ours, was on the moral evils whose genesis could be in principle explained, and which were therefore in principle avoidable. Readers were left with a message we have come to take for granted. Natural evils are things without meaning except in natural terms; we can at best alleviate their consequences by building earthquake-proof houses or finding cures for disease. And metaphysical evils become simply the finitude that is part of the human condition. We could see this as a solution that dramatically reduced the amount of evil in the world, while placing the responsibility for the remainder squarely in human hands.

Adopting Rousseau's introduction of history, Kant would substitute belief in humankind's ability to make moral progress for the belief in providence that his arguments had demolished. While he held such belief to be a postulate of practical reason that could not be derived from any facts about the world, he acknowledged the human need for a sign: faced with the appearance of so many kinds of human evil, we are likely to despair of the prospect of eradicating any of them. In those moments, our resolve to do so can no longer be strengthened by the idea that humankind has the potential to progress toward a better state; we seek some indication that it has, at least occasionally, actually done so. The indication Kant offers is decidedly minimalistic: not the French Revolution itself, but the hope disinterested observers felt in contemplating it, is a sufficient sign that humankind makes progress. Naming that as example in 1794 was certainly an act of political courage. For the nineteenth century, however, it signaled a lack of intellectual courage. Its major thinkers wanted more than hints that progress was possible; they wanted to show that it was actual and necessary.

Thus nineteenth-century philosophy was even more preoccupied with the problem of evil than the century before it and more likely to think it could be solved. This is one reason why Anglo-American philosophy included so little of it in standard curricula. It was possible to circumvent the problem of evil in Kant, but it was easier to circumvent

nineteenth-century philosophy as a whole than to ignore the centrality of the problem of evil in it. Comte, Hegel, and Marx offer visions of necessary progress in history that are so optimistic they may now make us shudder. For as Schopenhauer put it, his century was scrambling to get rid of Kant and drink to Leibniz.[11] Kant thought the gap between *ought* and *is* could be lessened but never entirely overcome. For Hegel, this view was just the expression of an unhappy consciousness.

Schopenhauer's remark about his contemporaries' return to Leibniz was not metaphorical. One of the most remarkable though least remarked upon passages in Hegel's work occurs in the introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*.

> Our investigation can be seen as a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God (such as Leibniz attempted in his own metaphysical manner, but using categories which were as yet abstract and indeterminate). It should enable us to comprehend all the ills of the world, including the existence of evil, so that the thinking spirit may yet be reconciled with the negative aspects of existence; and it is in world history that we encounter the sum total of evil . . . we must first of all know what the ultimate design of the world really is, and secondly, we must see that this design has been realized and that evil has not been able to maintain a position of equality beside it.[12]

Hegelians prefer to ignore his references to theodicy, since they think Leibniz's reputation was permanently damaged by Voltaire's caricature in *Candide*. But just a few pages later, Hegel makes clear he is not only prepared to return to Leibniz but also anxious to outdo him. The task of philosophy is to make us understand that the real world is as it ought

11 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2:582.

12 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 42–43.

to be and to show that nothing can thwart God's purposes. Philosophy reveals

> that God's will must always prevail in the end, and that world history is nothing more than the plan of providence. The world is governed by God, and world history is the content of his government and the execution of his plans. To comprehend this is the task of the philosophy of world history, and its initial assumption is that the ideal is fulfilled and that only that which corresponds to the ideal possesses reality . . . *the aim of philosophy is to defend reality against its detractors*.[13]

Students of Kant will find Hegel's return to Leibniz breathtakingly blithe. His claim that the actual world is as it should be equals the claim that this world is the best. Heine called Hegel the German Pangloss. But not even Pangloss claimed that *only* the ideal possesses reality.

The *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* one of Hegel's last works, claims that the equation of rational and actual is the conviction on which both the common man and the philosopher simply have to take a stand. To see why this is more than a simple glorification of existing power relations we need to understand Hegel's critique of Kant—even if we don't ultimately agree with it. Kant viewed the world as structurally flawed, built on a gap between *is* and *ought* that can be occasionally bridged but never eliminated. The problem of evil is thus built into the world—what Nietzsche called a metaphysical wound in the heart of the universe. It can be alleviated by human progress but never entirely overcome. Kant accused earlier philosophers of bad faith for denying the gap and insisted on giving each side equal weight. For Kant, the claims of reason are no less legitimate than those of nature. There is no reason to suppose that they will coincide, and enough evidence

13 Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures*, 67; emphasis added.

to show how often they don't. Hegel's return to Leibniz is based on the idea that Kant's view was an expression of modern—unhappy—consciousness, producing self-imposed alienation that could be overcome if he had only thought the problem through.

Hegel set out to show that the actual and the rational are one by showing that history itself revealed design and meaning, not merely the possibility thereof. This is the most important point of his *Phenomenology*'s well-known description of the struggle between master and slave. Having described history as a slaughter-bench, yet wanting to use it to reveal the effects of reason in the world, Hegel must find some sense inside evil itself. The master/slave dialectic doesn't merely stand at the beginning of history; it shapes the structure of historical explanation. Two men meet and begin to fight. For Hobbes, such battle is the expression of the striving for power after power that characterizes human relations in the state of nature. For Hegel, it is the beginning of understanding. Through a desire to force the other to yield, each man expresses his desire to be seen as a person, not a thing: the other's recognition is essential to his own self-consciousness. Our need for recognition is so crucial that we are willing to risk our lives to attain it. The man who blinks first becomes the slave, but there the cunning of reason begins, for the master can only retain the recognition he desires from an equal. By admitting defeat, the slave actually avoids it; forced to work, he uses consciousness to give form to mere matter—thus taking over the space of God Himself.[14] Since increasingly refined work is a higher form of activity than battle, the slave is closer to the spirit that reflects the Creator than the master who subdued him. Thus the world reveals a design that pushes history forward with just the right combination of freedom and necessity.

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14 Hegel's ways of replacing God deserve, and have been the subject of, whole books. See, for example, Emil Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension of Hegel's Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967).

For Kant, the consciousness of our alienation may be modern, but the reasons for it were there all along.[15] I share Kant's view that maturity requires us to acknowledge that there is a gap between the way the world is and the way the world should be—without denying the legitimacy of either. But the desire to merge the real and the rational is not only a natural but a good one—one of the urges of reason Kant holds to be prescribed by the very nature of reason itself. For the desire is not based on obscure demands of metaphysics but on the fact that *things go terribly wrong.* It's not about sugar and salt and rain and sunshine, all examples that Leibniz uses to show that the world is better for containing multiplicity, but about murder and torture and rape. It concerns earthquakes and tsunamis that wipe out not only miserable sinners but men and women of perfect decency—as Voltaire emphasizes in allowing the most generous character on Candide's ship to perish in the bay of Lisbon, while the brutish sailor who drowned him survives. When Hegel wrote the extraordinary claim that "the sole aim of philosophy is to eliminate the contingent," he had the pain caused by contemplating this sort of accident in mind.

Why does Hegel think that showing suffering as necessary is a way to escape it? To tell an individual that an awful event could not have been different offers consolation's barest bones. At most, it spares her the anguish of self-torment about what she might have changed. Perhaps removing some anguish is better than removing none at all. It is unbearable that the kindest person on board drowns in the tsunami while the brute of a sailor survives it. The example comes from fiction, but Voltaire was making a point: what makes us rail against providence is just this kind of accident. Unlike Pangloss, who demonstrated to Candide that "Lisbon harbour had been created expressly so that the

15 Walter Benjamin recognized the modernity of Kant's position in calling later philosophy an 11th-hour reactionary flight from the honesty of Kant's dualism. See his "Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present" (1912), in Walter Benjamin, *Early Writings: 1910–1917*, trans. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011), 77.

Anabaptist would be drowned in it,"[16] Hegel gives us a complex philosophy of history. The master/slave dialectic is brilliant, but it is brilliant in abstraction: no real slave was ever consoled by the thought that his work was a higher form of activity that drives history forward. No wonder Heine called Hegel the German Pangloss.

Hegel's impulse is just as understandable as Leibniz's. The real *should* be the rational; in Kant's formula, happiness and virtue ought to be proportional. Most people who pay enough attention to experience to see how often happiness and virtue fail to coincide tend to discount the claims of reason entirely, reducing reason's claims to habit, delusion, or wishful thinking. It's the first step on the road to nihilism, which is why Leibniz and Hegel and their heirs work so hard to avoid it. But the way they do so comes at a price. Their acceptance of the world as it is as perfectly rational may not be a *simple* glorification of existing power relations, but it's a glorification all the same. Arendt describes the alternatives most succinctly:

> Since Hegel and Marx, these questions have been treated in the perspective of history and on the assumption that there is such a thing as progress of the human race. Finally we shall be left with the only alternative there is in these matters—we can either say with Hegel: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht,* leaving the ultimate judgement to success, or we can maintain with Kant the autonomy of the minds of men and their possible independence of things as they are or have come into being.[17]

In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche wrote that anyone who thinks political events can heal the metaphysical wound at the heart of the universe deserves to become a professor of philosophy at a German

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16 Voltaire, *Candide,* in *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12.

17 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 1:216.

university, and he was presumably thinking of Hegel. Though he took a diametrically opposed direction, no one else perceived the connections between philosophy and theology as deeply as did Marx. For Marx, earlier philosophy was a double failure: after creating idols to take responsibility for human misery, it spent itself creating excuses for them. In the famous passage describing religion the opium of the people, Marx also called it

> the general theory of the world, its encyclopedia, its logic in popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur,* its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and the general ground for the consummation and justification of the world. Religious suffering is at once the *expression* of real suffering and the protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world.[18]

Because he saw theodicy as basic to religion, Marx believed that the criticism of religion was the first premise of all criticism. Every philosophical theodicy addresses the question of which evils are natural and which ones are moral. Marx was no exception, and his answer redrew boundaries that seemed fixed. What looked like facts of nature turn out to be a particular form of property relations, through which human beings create their own chains and call them natural necessity. Like other theodicies, Marx's justified suffering in the present by showing how it was necessary to overcome suffering in the future—hence his frequent praise of capitalism.

Marx's claim that "[p]hilosophy has hitherto interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it" can be taken as a rejection of philosophy, but it is a rejection that allowed Engels to say that communism is the unavoidable conclusion of German philosophy. I take this

18 Karl Marx, *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (New York: Viking Penguin, 1983), 115.

to mean at least three things: Hegel had suggested that human beings should replace God and be responsible for more of the world than we'd hitherto imagined. Second, Hegel's critique of Kant involved the claim that ideas that remain transcendent remain merely pious wishes; in arguing for the realization of those ideas Marx is merely turning Hegel's criticism on himself; the gap between nature and morality that Kant wanted to keep separate is overcome not by more theory, as Hegel had it, but by practice. Finally, we know that Marx was influenced by the *Phenomenology*'s claim that it's the slave's work that transforms the world and was fully aware of the context in which Hegel offered it. If Marx thought he could overcome philosophical theodicy, hence philosophy in general, it was because he thought he could solve the suffering that drove philosophy in real terms.

For the past two decades it became common to say that the end of real existing socialism disproved Marx's political and moral philosophy, but as the crises of real existing capitalism become more apparent, it makes sense to reconsider Marx's views. My goal here isn't to evaluate the success of Marx's political solutions but to situate them, and Hegel's, in a tradition which shows Schopenhauer to be right about nineteenth-century philosophy as a relentlessly cheerful attempt to go back to Leibniz.

Schopenhauer's awareness of this tradition, and his attempts to oppose it, are apparent throughout his work. Much of that work can simply be viewed as an anti-*Theodicy,* a book Schopenhauer so loathed as to say its only merit was to inspire "the immortal *Candide*." He went so far to offer a proof that ours is the worst of all possible worlds, for existence is so miserable and precarious that any number of changes could rend it entirely impossible. "Consequently the world is as bad as it possibly can be, if it is to exist at all. Q.E.D."[19] Schopenhauer's gift for black humor is unique in the history of philosophy, but he was not

19 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2:584.

entirely joking. On his view, suffering is the essence of existence; only the form of pain is accidental.

> Life presents itself as continual deception, in small matters as in great. If it has promised, it does not keep its word, unless to show how little desirable the object was; hence we are deluded now by hope, now by what is hoped for. If it has given, it did so in order to take. The enchantment of distance shows us paradises that vanish like optical illusions, when we have allowed ourselves to be fooled by them.[20]

In Schopenhauer, the omnipresence of suffering does not create the sort of problem it did for others, for the suffering is never innocent; he is convinced that humankind is as contemptible as its fate is awful. Life itself is criminal; no wonder it is always followed by capital punishment. Moral and natural evils are thus perfectly balanced: "the world itself is the tribunal of the world."[21] Schopenhauer considered himself to be the first real atheist in German philosophy and scorned his contemporaries' attempts to find a substitute for God. Still he argued against suicide, for it remains a protest against the world as it is, an affirmation of the will; and as such, for Schopenhauer, still contains a moment of hope. He recommends instead practices that destroy the will itself.

Schopenhauer is the most radical in a line of tradition that begins with Pierre Bayle and runs through Voltaire and Hume, all philosophers who insist on preserving the appearances. For them, any attempt to look behind or past appearances for a better, truer picture of reality is a form of bad faith. Suffering cannot be made intelligible without mocking those who suffer and closing one's eyes to the actuality of evil. All these writers were brilliant stylists, whose delight in irony and even

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20 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2:573.

21 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2:352.

sarcasm may seem to preclude a genuine concern for the reality of evil and its victims, but their work also underpins the moral standpoint expressed by Nietzsche:

> Regarding nature as though it were a proof of God's goodness and providence; interpreting history in honor of divine reason; as a constant testimonial to an ethical world order and ethical ultimate purpose . . . now all that is *over,* it has conscience *against* it, every sensitive conscience sees it as indecent, dishonest, cowardly.[22]

While Schopenhauer may have taught Nietzsche to reject every form of providence as a form of dishonesty, Nietzsche's work should be read as a protracted response to the classical problem of evil. Since the word "evil" even appears in one of his titles, it's impossible to deny his concern with some form of it, but there has been remarkably little attention to his use of the word "theodicy," which is frequent and profound. In *On the Genealogy of Morals,* Nietzsche calls the problem of evil

> my apriori. Indeed, as a thirteen year old boy, I was preoccupied with the problem of the origin of evil . . . I dedicated my first literary childish game, my first philosophical essay, to this problem, and as regards my "solution" to the problem at the time, I quite properly gave God credit for it and made him the *father* of evil . . . Out of my answers there grew new questions, inquiries, conjectures, probabilities—until at length I had a country of my own, a soil of my own, an entire discrete, thriving, flourishing world.[23]

Nietzsche's work connects the traditional problem of evil with more modern concerns about the understanding and prevention of evil actions

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22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 173.

23 Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 5.

by arguing that the question of theodicy was so central to our thinking that once we give up on traditional theodicy, we must reevaluate all our values. He came to believe that the problem of evil was not given but created—by those sages who were unequal to life. Hence they created an ideal world from which to condemn the real one. The clearest example was Christianity, which Nietzsche called the Platonism of the masses. For Christianity, the natural world is the source of everything wrong, the misery we suffer as punishment for the sins we commit. The supernatural world it created is both negation and redemption of this one.

> For Nietzsche, morality and life cannot be reconciled; one always condemns the other.
>
> For, confronted with morality (especially Christian, or unconditional, morality) life *must* continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life *is* something essentially amoral . . . Might not morality be "a will to negate life," a secret instinct of annihilation, a principle of decay, diminution, and slander—the beginning of the end? Hence, the danger of dangers?[24]

It is we who thus created the problem of evil by creating ideals that made life seem wanting, by continually denouncing the real with the rational. Nietzsche's work thus radicalized the modern movement to take increasing responsibility for evil that began with Rousseau; but for Nietzsche, we are responsible for the very concept of evil itself.

Despite his scorn for those writers of his century who sought to replace providence with various forms of progress, Nietzsche is keener to solve the problem in its entirety than anyone else. By his day, the denial of God's existence, or the description of God as a human projection, was fairly tame stuff. For Nietzsche it was superficial, for it failed to see how thoroughly repeated attempts at theodicy had affected all our

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24 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy,* in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 19.

thought. Hence his claim that we have killed God—in some passages, it's suggested, as just punishment after the long trial in which He could not be satisfactorily defended.[25] Nor could Nietzsche be satisfied with the sort of cheerful solution suggested by Feuerbach, taking up humanist values that had formerly been founded in religion and giving them meaning on our own. This underestimates the role that providence, whether reborn as progress or not, plays in our notions of value: the meaning of life resides in something that happens after it. Only a deliberate counter-theology is powerful enough to replace them. Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return is meant to be such a counterweight: rather than seeking meaning in life, and history, in an end beyond itself, we are to imagine time as recurring without any telos at all. The result, he believes, is a philosophy that affirms life as none before it could do. Nor did he shrink from hard cases; for Nietzsche, tragedy affirms life as no other form of art can. Even Job, he says, affirms.[26]

An essay of this length cannot fully evaluate any of the views it considers, nor even argue for the interpretations here given in sufficient detail. My aim has been to sketch a view of the history of modern philosophy, which shows in particular how thoroughly nineteenth-century philosophy was drenched in the problem of evil. Other texts would only strengthen this view. Darwin, for example, was crucial for the nineteenth century not because he showed that we're related to monkeys, a fact that still outrages American creationists, but for something much worse. Descent from the apes could, in principle, be part of a neo-Hegelian story in which we developed from simple beasts to increasingly free, creative beings, but that is a story Darwin refuses to tell. Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and others had replaced providence with history, giving us some hope for finding meaning in the world; Darwin

25 See, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 66.

26 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), 435.

tells us our history is the result of sheer accident. We no longer quite feel the force of this loss, but the nineteenth century did.

Study of the history of the problem of evil reveals our intuitions about evil to be far less clear than might be thought. In particular, the distinction between moral and natural evils that was at once an achievement and a hallmark of the modern has become ever harder to maintain. After Rousseau the word "evil" was restricted to acts done by human beings with intention; earthquakes became natural disasters without inherent meanings at all. I believe the twentieth century showed this distinction to be less helpful than the enlightenment thought, for it focused our attention on vast amounts of moral evil done without evil intention; and the twenty-first century makes the very attempt to distinguish between humanly and naturally caused disaster problematic. The extent of human power to alter nature has made the line between what is human and what is natural increasingly hard to draw. Drawing clear distinctions between natural catastrophes and human evils makes increasingly little sense in a world where we have the power to call up natural forces that could be nature's undoing—whether intentionally, through the nuclear weapons whose use is less regulated than ever before, or thoughtlessly, through the looming ecological disasters that could make Fukushima seem like a gentle warning. When human heedlessness stokes nature's fury, then leaves poor people at its mercy, it isn't merely tragic. It's evil. The history of philosophy provides material for reflection on the relations between natural and moral evils that once seemed so clear. This could mean, for example, taking moral responsibility for the natural disasters to which our reckless use of nature contributes. It could also begin to ask whether the death of thousands of children, every day, from poverty, is the sad result of natural economic processes or the fruit of systems that human beings made, and could therefore unmake as well. Has our thinking about evil come full circle? If the events of the last years make us realize that, they could provoke a change in our understanding as important as the one that occurred after the Lisbon earthquake.